



2010

Jean Rhys's Voyage in the Dark as a Trans-Atlantic Tragic Mulatta Narrative

Ania Spyra

Butler University, aspyra@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

"Jean Rhys's Voyage in the Dark as a Trans-Atlantic Tragic Mulatta Narrative." *Sargasso: Journal of Caribbean Literature, Language, and Culture*. I, 2009-2010. 79-92.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact fgaede@butler.edu.

Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* as a Trans-Atlantic Tragic Mulatta Narrative

Ania Spyra
Butler University

"A pretty useful mask that white one."

—Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*

Images of masks and masking surface repeatedly in Jean Rhys's 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark*; they describe the faces and artificial smiles of English people that Anna Morgan, the narrator and main character, meets when she immigrates to London from the West Indies after her father dies, and they act as an image of a loss of identity.¹ Most importantly, however, they refer to the white or "crude pink" masks worn by Blacks during the Caribbean carnival in Anna's native Dominica, which resurface in her memory at the end of the novel when she hallucinates in a delirium after a mishandled abortion. The carnival masks always include a slit through which the tongue can emerge and taunt the outraged white onlookers. But Anna does not feel taunted; she asserts she "knew why the masks were laughing" (186). Such an assertion of an intimate knowledge in the usually timid Anna suggests that she holds a particular insight into this "Black skin, White masks" situation: that her pale face might only be a mask covering her own racial mixture, or, in the least, it suggests Anna's own uncertainty about her genealogy.

My reading is complicated and aided by the original ending of the novel found and published six years after Rhys' death by Nancy Hemond Brown. The entirety of part IV of the novel originally counted almost two and an half thousand words more than the ending readers of Rhys's published works know (Hemond 41). Since all interpretation of the novel depends on the specific contexts of Anna's jumbled reminiscences and thoughts —what Mikhail Bakhtin would call framing— the original, longer text sometimes complicates

¹ Future references to this text are given in parentheses.

and sometimes helps to disambiguate statements made in the novel, framing them to suggest different meanings.² For example, it is Anna's father, rather than herself, who pronounces the words about the usefulness of white masks I opened with. Being closer to the family history, the father can speak even more authoritatively about the issue of racial relations in the family. On the other hand, it is still Anna who asserts the knowledge of why the masks are laughing. This time, additional context refigures her statement, "I knew why they were laughing they were laughing at the idea that anybody black would want to be white" (52), pointing once again to Anna's racial confusion and the centrality of racial masquerade as a theme in the novel.

But what interests me most here is that when Rhys was asked to re-write the original ending because of how grim and potentially unpopular with readers it was, she consented but continued to affirm that the original version was rendered "meaningless" because it provided "the only possible ending" (*Letters* 25). While in the revised ending, Anna, after some hallucinations, is supposed to be "ready to start all over again in no time" (187), in the original version, she bleeds to death after an abortion. Additionally, it was Rhys's initial intention to depict Anna's death as replicating both her father's and her mother's premature deaths, since Anna remembers her mother's servant, Meta, saying "she was too young to die" (Hemond 44). Why would Rhys see this vicious circle of tragic deaths as the most meaningful, or indeed the only possible, ending for *Voyage in the Dark*? My argument here is that the early and tragic death of the protagonist, especially when following that of her mother and father, places the novel firmly in the tradition of the "tragic mulatta" narrative, which –transplanted to the British context– calls for a more complex understanding of transatlantic reverberations of the plantation economy and the racial hierarchies and categories it left in its wake. While I do not mean to replicate an assumption of Anna's racial difference, I see the comparative context of the "tragic mulatto" narratives as productive in teasing out the critique of racial ideologies of the plantation system that *Voyage in the Dark* presents.

Although interracial characters inhabited literature since antiquity, the "tragic mulatto" trope derives more specifically from the context of sentimental antislavery narratives in the U.S. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic*

² In *Discourse in the Novel* Bakhtin describes "framing" as particularly important to the construction of meaning in a text: "[T]he speech of another, once enclosed in a context, is –no matter how accurately transmitted– always subject to certain semantic changes. The context embracing another's word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence might be very great" (782).

Explorations of Interracial Literature, Werner Sollors traces the representational matrices of mixed race figures across several languages and genres starting with Greek myths and Biblical parables. He notes an increase in interracial themes since the late eighteenth century, but carefully distinguishes between the cliché representation of a mulatto's tragic end—which he notices already in the various adaptations and rewritings of Joanna from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of Five Years Expedition in Suriname* (1796)—and the actual “tragic mulatto” trope. The essential difference lies for him in that the early interracial characters' tragic plotlines follow from their status as slaves and thus property, while the tragic mulatto's drama derives from their indeterminate race and being indentified as non-white even though they lead lives of free white people (Sollors 207). Sollors's definition of the “tragic mulatto” trope emphasizes that even if far away in time and space from the plantation, the characters who—like Rhys's Anna—may also seem entirely white still have to deal with echoes of the racial ideologies of the plantation system. Many scholars of the Caribbean—Édouard Glissant, C.L.R. James, Sidney Mintz, Philip Curtin, and David Scott to mention a few—have postulated the plantation system as an essential template for understanding modernity.³ I turn to Glissant in particular here, because as his postulation of the concept of Relation that connects Africa, Europe and the Caribbean (that for him includes southern US as well) into a web of filiations, he helps me theorize Rhys' trans-Atlantic “tragic mulatta.” Because the Relation itself is difficult to define, Michael Dash translates it in a variety of idiomatic ways: creolization, cultural contact, cross-cultural relationships. Glissant writes, “Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). Opposed to a totalitarian rootedness, with its connotation of unique origins, Glissant seeks for an alternative in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome with its “enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air” (11) to assert an existence of connections and influences that grow out of the plantation system. The imagery of rhizomatic connections and tangled webs of influence help me theorize both the distant geographical contexts that *Voyage in the Dark* engages and its fragmented form. Relation, with its confluence of time and space, helps elucidate also what Rhys saw as her main

³ I thank Mary Lou Emery for comments and for sharing the draft of her keynote address “The Poetics of Labour in Jean Rhys's Caribbean Modernism,” which influenced my argument.

intention in the novel –described in a letter to Evelyn Scott– to explore the idea that “the past exists side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was – is” (*Letters* 24).

Unlike characters of Rhys’s other European novels, Anna holds on to her Caribbean background despite her exile and lives as it were in two places and two time frames. Rather than feeling rooted, however, she maintains a rhizomatic relationship with the Caribbean, her identity extended through the relationship to her family and servants. Although –as many Rhys critics have noted– the Caribbean often acts in the novel as the site of idealized memories of warmth and color, Anna’s thoughts also return to the inequities and exploitation that enabled her comfortable childhood on the plantation. Because of her conflicted attitude about the Caribbean, Anna frequently does not reveal her background. Only in a conversation with Walter Jeffries, her older English lover, does Anna repeat that she is a “real West Indian... the fifth generation on [her] mother’s side” (55), as if in an attempt to assert her pure landowning roots. The claim, however, as Urmila Seshagiri noted, “describes an identity that history has robbed of meaning” (489) because through the vicissitudes of history it may connote many identities: Spanish, French, and English, African, indigenous, or a hybrid mixture of all of them. Most of the time –since her foreignness is perceptible in her speech rather than phenotype– Anna remains silent to mask the fact she comes from the West Indies because once she reveals her background, Britons immediately assume that as a Creole, she ought to be racially impure. Despite her White appearance, fellow music hall chorus girls in her troupe call her “the Hottentot,” a contemporary slur for blackness that marks her as “generically and genetically hot-blooded” and thus Black despite her visual whiteness (Berry 22, Murdoch 260).

While Kenneth Ramchand refers to *Voyage in the Dark* as “our first Negritude novel” (qtd. in Emery 12), seeing its racial dynamic as clearly polarized, the clues about Anna’s possible racial difference remain tacit. Mainly, it is the very fact of her coming from the colonies that marks her as impure and morally degenerate: degraded by contacts with the colonized and the insalubrious climate. Contemporary science and popular understanding considered Creoles to be a different type of human being even without racial mixing. In “Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise,” Michelle Cliff quotes a definition of Creole from the eleventh edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* published in 1911: “the difference in type between the creoles and the European races from which they have sprung, a difference often considerable, is

due principally to changed environment – especially to the tropical or semi-tropical climate of the lands they inhabit” (Cliff 42). The evolutionary logic of social Darwinism employed here points to the environment as the reason for the degeneration of the pure European stock, regardless of whether racial mixture contributed to it.

Such prejudice was institutionalized by science. In a study of mixed-blood races contemporaneous with the setting of the novel, Edward Byron Reuter treats analogous hearsay as scientific information and asserts that, “exceptionally light skinned girls [...] are occasionally able to secure white husbands from the immigrants to the island, whom they have deluded into believing that they are really white” (69). The assertion of racial impurity derives in his study from the perception that colonies are sexually incontinent. Reuter quotes examples of Black people of both Haiti and Jamaica to claim that, “their sex relations are of frankly natural sort” (63) with “well over half of the births being illegitimate” (67). In the novel, Anna’s English stepmother Hester repeats the prejudices formed on the basis of contemporary science. She talks about Anna’s father as “buried alive” in the colony, “cheated into buying” an estate and probably also into marrying a colored woman (62). Hester’s disgust at any racial mixing transpires also in her harangues against Anna’s uncle Ramsey who actually admits to his children, “all colours of the rainbow” (63). She goes on to pity Anna’s “unfortunate propensities, [which she] probably can’t help” (65), clearly implying that Anna’s slow descent into prostitution derives not from her deprived economic situation, but from her childhood and the island’s insalubrious climate and behaviors.

Hester’s statement about Anna’s unfortunate propensities derives from her belief in a possibility of miscegenation in any Creole family. When Anna asks for clarification she hears: “you know exactly what I mean, so don’t pretend” (65), which once again implies racial masquerade, pretending not to be what she is. However, when Anna understands that Hester is trying to “make out that her mother was colored” (65), she fervently denies it and thus reasserts the racial ideologies that she has internalized. Anna remains ambivalent towards race, because despite her denial here she often asserts that she “always wanted to be black” (31) and idealizes the lives of people of African descent on her island: “being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (31). She also seems repelled by whiteness and compares the color of white faces to “woodlice” (54). Thus, on the one hand, as Sue Thomas has observed, Anna’s attitudes to race mirror the essentialism of negritude that “does not escape the

Manichean logic of racial stereotype" because it reverses rather than dismantles binary structures of prejudice that it depends on (Thomas 101). On the other hand, however, it is clear that the novel questions the idea of purity when in the context of Anna's conversation with Hester surfaces an advertisement for cocoa, "What is purity? For Thirty-five Years the Answer has been Bourne's Cocoa" (58). Defined through an essentially brown product of the plantation economy, one that is grown in the colonies, processed in the metropolis to be exported all over the empire, purity becomes a tangled web of influences, commodified in a way analogous to Anna herself.

To give some substance to Hester's assumptions of impurity in Anna's bloodline, *Voyage in the Dark* hints at the possibility of Anna's maternal grandfather having sexual relations with a mulatta servant. As a teenager, Anna reads the slave-list at Constance Estate—her mother's family property—and her attention is caught with the name of "Mailotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant" (53). Although she is unable to explain why, she never forgets this name. It is the immediate framing of this recollection with Hester's comment—"the sins of the fathers [...] are visited on the third and fourth generation"—that suggests reading Mailotte as the grandfather's lover. In the dialogic context of Anna's memory, her father responds to Hester with "don't talk such nonsense to the child [...] a myth don't get tangled up in myths" (53) in an attempt to save Anna from believing in the possibility of having the 'stain' of blackness in her lineage, which could get her entangled in the myth of "tragic mulatto." The metaphor of entanglement resonates with Glissant's assertion that the "multiracial tangle" of the Plantation "created inextricable knots within the web of filiations" (71).

The main issue here is not whether Anna is indeed not-White, whether she is of "mixed blood" in the essentialist understandings of the day, but rather that her colonial status—if it continues being read in terms of the standards of racial purity of the plantation economy—makes her vulnerable to the sort of a tragic ending imagined as the only prospect for the antebellum American mulattas. In *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited*, Eve Allegra Raimon suggests that while often known in its masculine form as "tragic mulatto," it is the feminine form of the trope that evokes its complete reverberations. By the very fact of her gender, the "tragic mulatta" illustrates most fully the noxious influence of slavery on the possibility of survival of people of mixed race, which in turn epitomizes fears about the future of the national body as an interracial one. Raimon concludes that in the antebellum U.S. context sentimental writers

used the trope of the "tragic mulatta" to critique slavery because, as Sollors noted, it turned "what should be tender ties into marketable commodities" (203). If the "tragic mulatto" narratives aim at critiquing slavery and its sexual implications, Rhys's trans-Atlantic tragic mulatta critiques not only the sexual exploitation of poverty-stricken, disinherited women, but also colonialism at large because it contributed to women's dispossession and commodification in ways similar to Anna's.

Although it is now read rather as a critique of slavery (Raimon 2004, Sollors 1997), initially the myth of the "tragic mulatto" helped to establish the stereotype of biracialism as a tragedy in any society exposed to potential crossing of race boundaries. It depended on an essentialist view of Blackness as coming from even a "drop" of Black "blood" and acted as a warning because, as Paul Gilroy comments ironically in *Against Race*, "when national identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever present possibility of contamination. Crossing as mixture and movement must be guarded against" (105). He also adds that, "the hatreds turned towards the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar" outweigh the hatreds directed at those who are purely different because, "To have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal" (106). The blood "mixture" is then a reminder not only of the original rape, but also of the initial betrayal of the alleged purity of the race. Although Gilroy's comments pertain to the Hutu-Tutsi conflict of late twentieth century, hatred towards difference that escapes location and categorization was obviously even more pronounced at the beginning of that century.

In his early study of *The Negro in American Fiction* published in 1937, Sterling Brown observes that because of the "single drop of midnight in her veins" the mixed-race figure must "go down to a tragic end" (5). But a tragic ending is not the only characteristic that makes *Voyage in the Dark* conform to the literary tradition of the classic "tragic mulatto" narrative; rather, the whole plot fits well its conventions. Raimon gives a longer description of such a typical plot, which

regardless of the racial ancestry of the author ... involves a story of an educated light-skinned heroine whose white benefactor and paramour (sometimes also the young woman's father) dies, leaving her to the auction block and/or the sexual designs of a malevolent creditor. The protagonist, sheltered from the outside world, is driven to desperation by her predicament and perhaps to early death. (Raimon 7)

While obviously translated into a different time period and place, Anna's story of a benevolent West Indian father whose inheritance falls into the hands of his second wife, a malicious Englishwoman Hester, making Anna vulnerable to the sexual advances of older, upper class men in England, bears a striking resemblance to the generic plot.

Another classic study of the genre, Judith Berzon's *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, portrays the trope of "tragic mulatto" as "an outcast, a wanderer, one alone. He is the fictional symbol of marginality" (in Raimon 5) and so is Anna. Read at times in criticism as an example of a female flâneur (Joseph 1992), Anna wanders through the cold streets of England as an analogous lonely outcast, drifting into fragile relationships and places inimical to her. Elizabeth Abel has interpreted Anna's isolation and depression as signs of deeper mental disorders, which actually again inscribes her in the "tragic mulatto" conventions. As Michele Birnbaum points out in her article on racial hysteria in the early novels of passing, mental illness—especially neurasthenia and hysteria—have been traditionally seen as examples of familial diseases, inherited through the "tainted" line. Interestingly, madness in *Voyage in the Dark* is often discussed in terms of fractions. Ethel, a landlady who hopes to profit from Anna's youth, calls her "a half-potty bastard" when she lets her down, and intimates that this condition is visible, "Anybody just got to look at you to see that" (145). Later, Anna talks about having to be "three quarters mad" if she wanted to actually attempt to communicate with Walter's friend and envoy Vincent (172). The mathematical vocabulary of fractions reflects the contemporary descriptions of blood mixtures. While the very term "mulatto" typically referred to an offspring of a White and a Black parent, in the "tragic mulatto" narratives the protagonist was usually imagined as a Quadroon or Octoroon,⁴ because the idea that the trace of difference—that single drop—remains hidden and the person can potentially pass for White is constructed as the very essence of the misfortune of a "tragic mulatto" (Brown 6). Thus, like in the generic form of the traditional narrative, Anna is not alleged to come directly from a White and a Black parent, but remains more removed from the trace of an alleged African genealogy.

⁴ "Quadroon" and "Octoroon," were terms for categorizing people of mixed African and European descent based on what Sollors calls a "calculus of color" in which the "percentage" of African ancestry was marked; the former term meant a person had one-quarter African ancestry, while the latter indicated one-eighth African ancestry, and was thus barely "visible" (see Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White, Yet Both*, pp. 112-139).

That the novel casts Anna's relationships with men in terms of rape matches other descriptions of the classic conventions of a tragic mulatta narrative. In an article that reads Michelle Cliff's writing as reformulating the genre, Suzanne Bost focuses on the motif of the clash of cultures which racial mixing is supposed to engender and which parallels Anna's inability to assimilate to life in Britain: "Despite her attempts to assimilate into the white society that is part of her heritage, [her] tragic racial admixture leads to a clash of cultures, which often results in her death" (675). When Bost writes, "Mixed blood is a curse for the tragic mulatto in that it acts as a reminder of an original rape and of the imbalance of power that led to coerced sexual relations between white men and black women" (Bost 675), she comes back to the idea of the "original treason" raised already by Gilroy. The original rape Bost mentions here finds its reflection in Anna's relationship with Walter, and later in the liaisons that lead to her unwanted pregnancy.

Significantly, it is while in bed with Walter that Anna thinks again of Mailotte Boyd, only to see their experiences in *Relation*: both of them are eighteen and caught up in relationships based on an imbalance of power. Although Anna tries to convince herself that she accepts her situation and "like[s] it like this... [doesn't] want it any other way but this" (56), she is conscious that —much as Mailotte had no way of escaping the relationship with Anna's grandfather— there is no other possibility but rape or prostitution for the relationship between her and Walter. Though in significantly dissimilar circumstances that cannot be conflated, both women lose their ability to decide about and protect their bodies. Anna's pregnancy appears to be an outcome of a rape as well. Anna keeps remembering herself asking "stop please stop" and the response of a man who does not stop, "I knew you'd say that" (184); Anna fixates on his white face, which she coolly describes in the original version of the ending as "very white and his nostrils going in and out" (Hamond 49). The mask-like quality of this face —in both versions the face is framed with a mention of carnival masks— and its function as a metonymy for a White male suggest an even stronger mirroring between Anna and Mailotte's situations. While Elaine Savory has critiqued Anna's fleeting identification with Mailotte Boyd as an appropriation that is "troubling, suggesting how deep and problematic Anna's fantasies run" (60), such *Relation* of the past and present —as Rhys's succinctly phrased it, "what was — is" (*Letters* 24)— and the uncanny similarity of the mulatto servant to the disinherited granddaughter several generations later,

emphasize the persistence of sexual and racial stereotypes that have been imported from the colonies to the metropolis.

This conflation of the past and present becomes most pronounced in the last part of the novel, when Anna hallucinates in the delirium of lost blood. The mantra Anna repeats in the original, longer version of the ending, "I'm not here I am there I'm not here I am there." It suggests that she sees her death as related to the continuing reverberations of slavery and colonialism. The elision among the different referents of "it ought to be stopped"—Anna's bleeding, her prostitution, the carnival, the grating sound of the kerosene-tins during it, and slavery itself—bring together the various strings of entangled critique that the novel performs. Here, the Caribbean carnival masks play a major role, Anna's parents and uncles discussing their views of slavery through their commentary on the carnival. Anna's understanding of the past seems greater; she knows what the women in masks were singing: "they were singing defiance" (51); she also explains that they are laughing "at the idea that anybody black would want to be white" (52). Black people exhibit more power here and more defiance. Their defiance is also clearer in the more detailed development of the character of Meta, who appears in the published version only once, sticking her tongue out at Anna through the slit in the mask (178). In the original ending, Meta and Anna actually engage in a physical struggle when Meta reacts to Anna's calling her "black devil" by shaking her until her teeth, hair, and flesh shook (Hemmond 47). No wonder such a corporeal memory of her own racism and the resistance it met makes Anna seem much more aware of the inequities at the heart of the plantation economy.

Since the original ending provides a much clearer resolution to many of the novel's preoccupations, the only way to explain why Rhys finally embraced the shorter, more hopeful ending—which she could have changed in subsequent editions—is that the revised, hopeful end of the novel problematizes its inclusion among the tragic mulatta narratives. Although many critics seem to agree that "death would perhaps be a preferable alternative to [Anna's] death-in-life existence" (Dearlove 28) and most of them deny Anna any possibility of a good life after she has become a prostitute, Rhys hints at the possibility of at least a psychically healthy life for her character. In a burst of optimism unparalleled in the novel, in its last scene, Anna fantasizes about being "new and fresh. And about mornings, misty days, when anything might happen" (188). Maybe this ending—unwanted and implausible as it was for Rhys—signifies more in its attempt to defy the myth of the "tragic mulatta" in which

Anna got entangled despite her father's warnings. To give a mulatta a less tragic ending points to a hope for a more positive view of Relation, in which the reverberations of the plantation economy stop playing as important a role in predetermining a tragic outcome for any descendant of the colonial web of filiations.